

Preserving a Piece of History

The Battle of Wilson's Creek (called Oak Hills by the Confederates) was fought 10 miles southwest of Springfield, Missouri on August 10, 1861. Named for a stream that crosses the area where the battle took place, it was a bitter struggle between Union and Confederate forces for control of Missouri in the first year of the Civil War.

A Confederate First National or "Stars and Bars" pattern flag is a rare piece of history. Wilson's Creek is fortunate to not only have a First National Flag in its collection, but this particular flag was carried at the Battle of Wilson's Creek in 1861. The identity of the unit that carried the flag may never be known, but it was captured on a portion of the battlefield used as a campsite by Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri cavalry units. Those units were the Third Texas Cavalry, First Arkansas Mounted Rifles, First Arkansas Cavalry (State Troops), and Brown's and Major's Missouri State Guard Cavalry.

Theodore Cline Albright, a private in Company C, First U.S. Cavalry Regiment, was temporarily detached from his company and served with the Second U.S. Dragoon Regiment during the Battle of Wilson's Creek. Private Albright successfully retrieved the flag during the fighting and carried it back into Springfield when the Union army left the battlefield. According to stories passed down through the family, Pvt. Albright lost one of the flag's stars as a souvenir to his company commander. Somewhere along the line he lost other pieces of the flag to souvenir hunters, but he managed to bring the rest of the flag home to St. Louis after his discharge from the Regular Army in 1861.

Wilson's Creek National Battlefield was officially established as a unit of the National Park Service in April 1960. Through the efforts of the Wilson's Creek Foundation, a group of local individuals, the site had received national recognition. Through the years, many artifacts relating to the history of the battle and the area were given to the park to preserve and maintain.

The Confederate First National Flag stood out from the rest and with the help of a local organization the park was able to preserve this important piece of history.

In April 1990, Charles Hudson and Theodore E. Albright III, Pvt. Albright's great grandson, donated the flag to the National Park Service and Wilson's Creek National Battlefield. The piece remained in the park's collection, in need of conservation treatment, until 1997 when another local group became involved with this piece of history.

The Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV), General James H. McBride Camp #632, graciously agreed to lead the fundraising efforts to have the flag professionally conserved. According to John Wolfe, Camp Commander of the SCV, the flag "is a symbol of the heritage of our ancestors as well as an archive of history that needed to be preserved." The flag was the main symbol of the new Confederate nation, just as the "Stars and Stripes" is a symbol today of the United States. It was also the point of rally and guidance for the troops in the field. "Follow the flag" was heard many times on the battlefield. It was considered an honor to not only carry the flag into battle but to lay down one's life for it. On the other hand, it was a great disgrace to lose the flag to the enemy; as a result, it was highly sought after by the enemy. The Confederate First National served as the official flag of the Confederacy for two years and was then replaced by the Second National Flag. One of the reasons for the change in flag by the Confederate government was that the First National was very similar in appearance to the Stars and Stripes and had caused some confusion on the battlefield.

The SCV and the park entered into an agreement to conserve and preserve this important piece of history. The SCV agreed to raise all the money necessary to conserve the piece, including shipping and storage, and the park agreed to be the liaison with the conservator and provide for the public enjoyment of the flag unimpaired for future generations by displaying

Confederate First National Flag as received by Textile Preservation Associates.

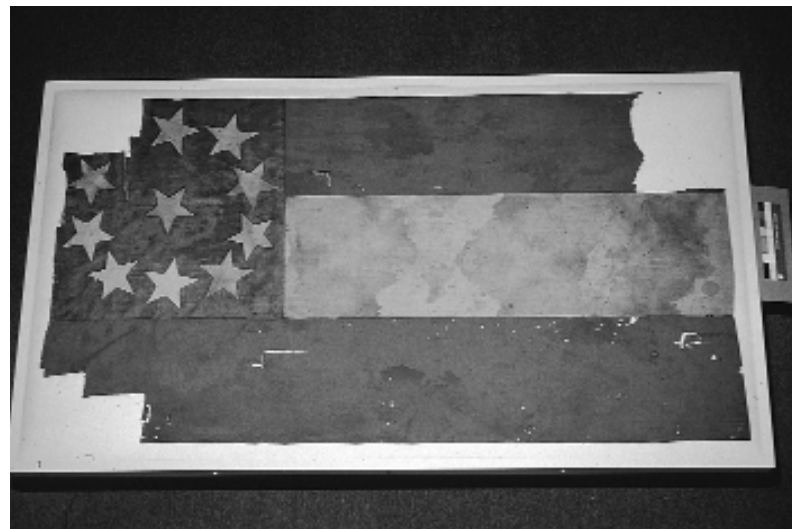
the piece in the visitors center.

The flag was first appraised by local Civil War collector and owner of General Sweeney's Museum of Civil War History, Dr. Thomas P. Sweeney. According to Sweeney, "There are no battle honors on the flag since this was probably the first battle in which it was flown. This is a rare flag in that there are very few known Confederate flags still in existence from this battle." Next, the flag was sent to Textile Preservation Associates in Maryland for treatment.

Confederate First National Flag after conservation treatment and framing.

The flag was heavily stained and soiled throughout and there were several tears in it, plus the areas where pieces had been removed for souvenirs. The flag was first photographed, then the fibers, fabrics, and sewing threads were analyzed, and scale drawings were made. It was then vacuum cleaned to remove airborne particles, and tested to see if wet cleaning was possible. Acidity levels in the flag tested between 4.0 and 4.4 so the decision was made to wash it. It was de-acidified in deionized water, blotted to remove excess water, and flattened under glass weights. Some color was lost in the blue canton area, so that area was covered with a layer of Blue Stabiltex to restore the color and enhance the appearance of the canton. The flag was then pressure mounted in a custom built frame and ultra-violet filtering plexiglass laid over it.

This piece of history is now proudly displayed in the visitors center at Wilson's Creek National Battlefield. The agreement between Wilson's Creek and the SCV is an excellent example of a partnership between a private volunteer agency and the National Park Service. The local Sons of Union Veterans Camp have also taken up



the challenge of preserving their heritage. They are currently raising funds to preserve a Union guidon to hang proudly next to the Confederate First National flag.

Without the assistance of the SCV this important piece of history might have remained in storage for an extended period. Now it is displayed prominently in the visitors center, where the public can learn about the significant role the flag played in the Battle of Wilson's Creek and in the Civil War.

Connie Slaughter is the historian at Wilson's Creek National Battlefield.

Photos courtesy Textile Preservation Associates.